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CIA Shift Returns Covert Operations Veteran to Post

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In his shift of four high-level officials, CIA Director William J. Casey is returning a veteran clandestine operative to covert operations after a controversial one-year stint as Casey's liaison with Congress.

Clair E. George, 53, who will be the CIA's deputy director for operations at a time when Congress is balking at further funding of the covert war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government, is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University.

According to the State Department's Biographic Register, George has served in Hong Kong, Paris, Mali and India. During the 1970s he was CIA station chief in Beirut and Athens. He took the latter post in 1976 after the assassination of Richard S. Welch.

George was the assistant director of the clandestine service before moving to the legislative job last summer. He has become a lightning rod for congressional distrust of Casey's candor on secret operations, such as aid to the "contras" fighting the Sandinistas.

In April, when members of the Senate Intelligence Committee were irate over Casey's failure to brief them fully on the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, committee staff director Robert R. Simmons said George had "the same mindset as Casey," who ran secret operations in World War II. "That match is a prescription for disaster," Simmons said.

A senior committee staff member said yesterday that he thought George was being moved because of such dissatisfaction. The aide noted that a normal CIA tour of duty, even in hot spots overseas, is 18 months. "I can't believe that dealing with Congress is that obnoxious he could only last a year," the staff member said.

A senior CIA official, however, said that George was not being replaced because of displeasure in Congress. As head of covert operations, "he'll have to go to testify, so it's hardly an effort to get Clair out of the way of Congress," this official said.

He said that when George took the legislative job, Casey promised him that the assignment would last only one year. Several months ago, the outgoing head of covert operations, John H. Stein, 51, asked to be moved to another position, the official added. Stein will become the agency's inspector general.

George will be replaced in the legislative job by Charles A. Briggs, 57, currently the agency's executive director, the No. 3 job. The current IG, James H. Taylor, 45, will become executive director.

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